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SUBJECT: SOUTH KOREAN NGOS' UPHILL STRUGGLE IN NORTH KOREA

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) In early March, DPRK officials faxed a request to their ROK counterparts at Mt. Kungang saying that South Korean aid workers should "temporarily" halt visits to Mt. Kungang and Kaesong, but noting that aid would still be accepted, with no further explanation. The message encapsulated North Korea's attitude toward South Korean NGOs: maximize aid, minimize NGOs' influence, and communicate cryptically, a situation that has changed little since the 2003 publication of "Paved with Good Intentions," edited by Scott Snyder and Gordon Flake, about NGOs' early experiences in the DPRK.

¶2. (SBU) Nevertheless, many of the 73 ROK NGOs that have undertaken to help the North, as well as religious groups such as Seoul's Full Gospel Church, which broke ground on a USD 20 million cardiac hospital in Pyongyang in December, are determined to persevere, motivated by a dogged sense of humanitarian or Christian obligation to their fellow Koreans. Representatives of leading South Korean NGOs say that patience and hard bargaining have allowed them to gradually expand their reach beyond Pyongyang, and beyond food aid to agricultural development and operating cooperative farms (15 NGOs), and medicine and health (10 NGOs). It is not clear whether ROKG support for such NGO activities, which funded about 15 percent of the USD 1 billion worth of aid in 2006, will continue in the Lee Myung-bak administration. End Summary.

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PROFILES OF ACTIVE NGOS  
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¶3. (SBU) To get a sense of ROK NGO activities and difficulties working in the DPRK, we recently met with several of the most active groups.

-- Korean Sharing Movement (KSM)

In 1994, the DPRK announced that it needed food aid, confirming reports of severe shortages rumored since 1991, according to a representative from the Korean Sharing Movement (KSM), which was one of the first ROK NGOs to respond. The immediate humanitarian need was rice and corn, which NGOs had to provide indirectly through the South Korean Red Cross, due to ROKG restrictions at the time. When President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2002) launched the Sunshine

Policy, the ROKG took over providing food assistance. NGOs such as KSM turned to improving agricultural production and other areas such as medical technology. As a result, emergency and relief aid, which accounted for 96 percent of ROK private aid to the North during 1995-1998, made up only 37 percent during 2002-2006, replaced by agricultural assistance (46 percent) and health/medical assistance (17 percent). The DPRK encouraged the shift, seeking developmental rather than humanitarian aid since 2005. KSM, one of the most active ROK NGOs, which has served as a de facto coordinator for smaller NGOs and local ROK governments (such as Gyeonggi Provincial government) active in the North, has patiently expanded its operations in terms of number, type and location. The KSM representative said that the basic food situation in North Korea had improved enough from the mid-1990s famine era that now many NGOs' focus was on providing more protein and increasing the North's food production capacity through agricultural technology projects. Like the other NGO representatives, the KSM representative said that his organization typically sends groups of aid workers to the DPRK roughly once or twice each month.

-- Okedongmu ("Shoulder-to-Shoulder")

Okedongmu targets mothers and children, providing soymilk and school supplies and operating a specialized hospital for pregnant women in Pyongyang that opened in 2006. The NGO also established a pediatric section of a hospital in Nampo, on the DPRK's east coast, and is building a new pediatric wing at the Pyongyang Medical School where rural physicians (with abysmal qualifications, according to the representative) will be trained. After trying and failing to get permission to train DPRK physicians at Seoul National University (SNU), Okedongmu also set up a program to train a few physicians in China for six months. A desired next step is to get permission for South Korean physicians to lecture to North Korean medical students and personnel in the DPRK; only individual ROK physicians have been allowed brief visits so far.

-- World Vision Korea

South Korea's World Vision NGO is independent from the international NGO, is the only ROK NGO with an office in North Korea (Pyongyang), and seems uniquely successful. Following Kim Jong-il's 1998 decree that North Koreans should pursue potatoes as a main source of food, World Vision Korea established a potato-seed research center in Pyongyang, since expanding the effort -- to the envy of other NGOs "stuck" in Pyongyang -- to five other areas of the country, including 57 hectares of land for research on potatoes and other vegetables. The NGO also sponsors an annual symposium on agriculture in Pyongyang (December 2007 was the most recent one) that brings 40 ROK academics to the DPRK, and will train five DPRK scientists on seed development technology in China this year.

-- Full Gospel Church

Over half of the ROK NGOs working in the DPRK have a religious focus, according to the Ministry of Unification, though they know from the outset that proselytizing is excluded. Seoul's 750,000-member Full Gospel Church made news in December 2007 when it broke ground on a USD 20 million cardiac hospital in Pyongyang, including a planned USD 5 million from the Ministry of Unification's inter-Korean funds. The church sent 250 of its members to Pyongyang on a special chartered flight from Seoul for the groundbreaking ceremony, and held a joint worship service with a North Korean congregation in Pyongyang's Chilgol official Protestant Church. An elder of the Full Gospel Church active in the project said that the full cost of the hospital will exceed USD 40 million, with discussions of what equipment to get and how to pay for it just beginning. The DPRK wants to insist on the latest-model medical equipment, without addressing issues such as adequate electricity and water supply.

-- Presbyterian Church of Korea

Another overtly religious effort is that of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, a sub-denomination of the Presbyterian Church, whose elders' committee paid to rebuild the Bongsoo Protestant Church in Pyongyang (the other official church in Pyongyang) and has provided disaster relief after recent floods in the DPRK. The organization has also worked on agricultural development and disaster relief. The organization's representative said that the group is trying to help North Koreans because "it is a sin to ignore their sufferings," but she also expressed dismay at having to hand over bags of flour to DPRK officials after the 2006 floods, without having any way of knowing who would end up with the flour. "We just counted out the bags, got a receipt, and then who knows?" she said.

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DEALING WITH DPRK OFFICIALDOM  
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14. (SBU) In separate conversations, all of the NGO representatives we met with described frustrating efforts to reach and keep agreements with their DPRK interlocutors, claiming little insight into the DPRK bureaucracy. Of the 73 ROK NGOs active in the DPRK (based on required registration with the Ministry of Unification), all but one are considered "social" organizations and are thus assigned to the National Reconciliation Council as their counterpart, while World Vision Korea has the relatively good fortune to interact with the National Economic Cooperation Federation for the "economic" nature of their activities, which has given them access to areas off-limits to other South Korean NGOs. Both of those DPRK organizations are formally under the Asia Pacific Peace Committee, charged with handling relations with South Korea, but now the two bodies act rather autonomously, according to the KSM representative. Meanwhile, the Chosun Christian Federation (CCF) handles religious NGOs and the Flood Damage Recovery Agency handles foreign NGOs. Medical projects require interaction with the DPRK's Medical Association.

15. (SBU) KSM's representative said that there was continual tension between the NGOs, which wanted to get out of Pyongyang and do a wider variety of projects involving more contact with North Korean residents, and the DPRK officials, who insisted on having most activities in Pyongyang, probably because of its hand-picked population, thus limiting the interaction with North Koreans. NGOs sometimes win the tug-of-war only by threatening to walk away.

16. (SBU) While showing us the pictures of the excavation site for USD 20 million hospital that the Full Gospel Church is building in Pyongyang, the church's representative said that the process was an "unending, long-lasting series of negotiations," and that he would have often chosen to give up on the effort had it not been for his sense of duty as a Christian believer.

17. (SBU) The Okedongmu representative noted that shifting to hands-on development assistance was a good step for ROK NGOs, because NGO workers now get more frequent access to sites. She said she developed a close working relationship with a Counselor on the National Reconciliation Council, but the official, like others, was rotated out of the position after 18 months. Even so, local DPRK officials have sometimes helped push agreements up the chain of command to get central government approval. She added that her organization had to be careful not to make a big deal of DPRK authorities' failure to live up to their side of an agreement, such as providing a certain amount of material at a certain time, because "stronger" DPRK organizations often absconded with designated materials or equipment. DPRK officials are also sometimes reluctant to agree to allow NGOs to start projects because they see themselves as prone to losing face if the projects can't be completed because of shortcomings on the DPRK side.

18. (SBU) Evidently, perseverance gets results: the Full

Gospel Church, after threatening several times to suspend the project entirely, eventually reached agreement with its counterpart, the Chosun Christian Federation, to reduce the floor area of the hospital from 30,000 square meters (m2) to 20,000 m2, and to include 100 m2 for worship space and 60 m2 for a pastor's office. But the resulting contract is "tricky." It is difficult to know whether the hard-fought agreements, such as the church's insistence that it have a role in the management of the hospital and the selection of patients, will hold up in practice. As evidence of the DPRK's real interest in the project, the church was able to send 100 truckloads of construction materials overland for the first time through Kaesong City in December 2007, bringing 2,500 tons of materials to the site; most NGO aid shipments still go through the longer sea route. The representative said that he is well aware the agreements with the DPRK can go awry, so he has taken 12 three-day trips to Kaesong and Pyongyang since taking on the project in 2007, to try to keep things on track, and the two sides exchange fax messages through Kaesong Industrial Complex every day.

¶9. (SBU) Other veteran NGO representatives also described making progress through patience and hard bargaining. It took one and a half years of take-it-or-leave-it insistence before Okedongmu got agreement to build a rural center that provides soymilk and other protein-rich foods in Kangnam County, about 20 miles south of Pyongyang, because the DPRK officials feared "ideological contamination" of children there, the NGO's representative told us. The NGO is allowed access to the village only once every three months. She explained that UN agencies such as UNICEF and foreign NGOs were allowed wider rural access because they were "safe" without Korean speakers.

¶10. (SBU) World Vision Korea fared better because in 2001 its counterpart became the more development-focused National Economic Cooperation Federation, which recognized World Vision Korea as contributing to the development of the DPRK economy. With the help of the ROKG Ministry of Agriculture, which sent an official along, World Vision was able to do a national survey of North Korean agricultural areas before deciding where best to locate its potato-seed centers. The DPRK government reacted enthusiastically, seeing World Vision's work as a "revolution in agricultural development," the representative said. Notwithstanding its advantageous relationship, World Vision "fought for a year" before it was allowed to set up a noodle factory in Pyongwon, north of Pyongyang near the Sunan International Airport, that feeds 10,000 people per day. Later, World Vision was able get DPRK government agreement at the county level to set up health centers at cooperative farms. The lesson seems to be that NGOs should try to land the National Economic Cooperation Federation as their counterpart, but the trend has been in the other direction: after the 2001 floods, which attracted help from many new ROK NGOs, the DPRK government assigned all but World Vision to the National Reconciliation Council.

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INSIGHT INTO THE DPRK?  
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¶11. (SBU) NGO representatives, several of whom travel to North Korea multiple times each year, were hesitant to generalize about conditions in North Korea, recognizing that they were presented with a filtered picture on each visit. For example, one western NGO representative who spoke good Korean, unbeknownst to his host, said that he overheard a rural official and his guide discussing how to answer a basic question he had asked about whether a certain area produced enough food for the local population.

¶12. (SBU) Representatives doing medical work provided the most disturbing reports. The Okedongmu representative visited six hospitals in Pyongyang with physicians from Seoul National University, who were shocked at how bad conditions were, saying that "no treatment would have been better." In another hospital, technicians had never seen modern X-ray equipment so the NGO had to provide basic instruction on

operating the equipment and reading the film. Realizing that medical personnel there knew very little, the NGO returned with basic medical textbooks showing how to spot pneumonia and other diseases. Still, DPRK officials long resisted the idea of Okedongmu building a new hospital, agreeing only after the ROK Ministries of Unification and Health interceded.

¶13. (SBU) The World Vision representative said that a Pyongyang hospital his team visited had neither saline solution nor intravenous bottles, instead using inverted beer bottles filled with water for some patients, adding that the method was tested on rabbits beforehand. A representative from Good Friends, another ROK NGO said to have a large network of contacts in the DPRK, said that in many rural areas doctors spend three days per week searching for herbal medicines and treat patients with these remedies on the other three days.

¶14. (SBU) As for living standards among the North Koreans they saw and interacted with, the Okedongmu representative said that conditions were definitely more difficult outside of Pyongyang. It was difficult to know about food sufficiency, but a general observation was that coastal and farm areas did better. Hence, her observation was that people in urban areas besides Pyongyang (special population with the only functioning Public Distribution System for food) such as Nampo had a hard time finding enough food. She added that she and her colleagues were most struck by the lack of technology and transportation available to most North Koreans. They kept their eyes open for bicycles and dogs in villages as signs that people were doing relatively well (a method used by anthropologists to gauge the development level of a particular area), but they saw few of either, except in few areas such as Kaesong, near the Kaesong Industrial Complex. The World Vision representative said that his NGO had learned that crop production had declined in recent years because of lack of fertilizer and pesticides.

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COMMENT  
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¶15. (SBU) Among the NGO representatives we met, there were no apologists for the DPRK regime. Instead, there was abundant frustration at the regime and the restrictions it places on private South Koreans trying to help fellow Koreans. Even so, we were struck by the doggedness of these individuals, who have decided to stick with giving agricultural and medical assistance to North Korea even though they know that some aid is diverted, that target populations may not be those most in need, and that the North Korean bureaucracy wants to accept the aid without being polluted by the ROK's influence. This private stream of assistance and contact with the North is likely to become a more important element in South-North relations this year, since it is not clear how much, if any, official assistance the ROKG will provide.  
VERSHBOW